April 1976
Volume 1, Number 6

American Film

Journal of the Film and Television Arts

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The American Film Institute is an independent, non-profit organization serving the public interest, established in 1967 by the National Endowment for the Arts to advance the art of film and television in the United States of America. The Institute preserves films, operates an advanced conservatory for filmmakers, gives assistance to new American filmmakers through grants and internships, provides guidance to film teachers and educators, publishes film books, periodicals and reference works, supports basic research, and operates a national film repertory exhibition program.

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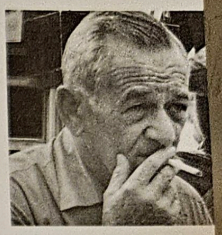

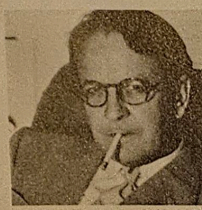

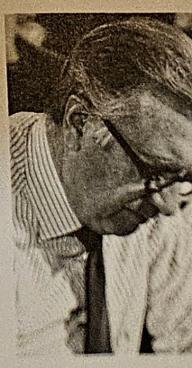

Kenneth Anger's
Magic Quest

The Underground Man

Kenneth Turan

"I see myself as a loner, I suppose," the man says, his delicate Roman-coin face taking on some of James Dean's tortured sensitivity in the half-light of an after-dinner candle. "I'm working alone, I enjoy my independence, I'm quite happy to continue life on these terms. I've never tried to live for somebody else's expectations of what I should be like. I've never tried to play a role."

He is a careful, even fastidious dresser, wearing a brown corduroy suit with the jacket buttoned, a nicely matching brown shirt and tie. With his black curly hair and the vaguest hint of a paunch, he seems very much the quiet aesthete, a Saturday afternoon gallery visitor perhaps. "I'm not," he admits, "an immediately outgoing person." Only his lips, full, sensuous, outrageous, give a hint that this is Kenneth Anger, the author of *Hollywood Babylon*; the filmmaker Amos Vogel calls "one of the true subversive iconoclasts of the cinema"; "the *enfant terrible* of the avant-garde," according to P. Adams Sitney; the creator of *Scorpio Rising*, *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, *Invocation of My Demon Brother*, and more; the man who at the very tender age of seventeen made the classic *Fireworks*, Tennessee Williams's choice as "the most exciting use of cinema I have ever seen."

A great temptation exists to consider Kenneth Anger passé, a relic of the so-called underground film turbulence of the mid-1960s. After all, *Fireworks* was made back in 1947, *Scorpio Rising* in 1963, and it was in 1968 that he received *Film Culture*'s Tenth Independent Film Award "for giving to our eye and our senses some of the most sensuous and mysterious images cinema has created, for being the Keeper of the Cinema." Even his name, "an abbreviation of my family name, deliberately chosen when I began making films for what it means as well as how it sounds," seems an echo of an earlier age.

Yet in truth Kenneth Anger is very much of a survivor, a man who doesn't feel "I was any more interesting as a creative person twenty years ago or ten years ago than I am today. I see a continuum, I don't see a retired fossil who is ruminating over his yellowed press clips." His new hardcover version of *Hollywood Babylon* is selling extremely well and might lead to a compilation film. Director William Friedkin has asked him to play himself in a cameo in his upcoming film *A Safe Darkness*: "I can't think of an easier way to make a few thousand dollars." And his latest personal film and his most expensive to date, *Lucifer Rising* (to be finished within a year), was able to attract prestigious outside financing, including 25,000 pounds from the British National Film Finance Corporation and an equal amount from the German national television network.

Perhaps most impressive is the continued vitality of his older films. In Georges Sadoul's authoritative *Dictionary of Film Makers*, Anger is linked with Maya Deren as the "two most important names in the development of the New American Cinema." Yet while her films, in Anger's words, "aren't looked at very much anymore—it seems they've fallen into a kind of limbo," the opposite is true for his. "They haven't dropped from sight," he says. "They're actually being shown more than they ever were. I have about a dozen prints of each of my films in constant circulation, and there's been a gradual increase over the last fifteen years of just

Two portraits of the artist: Kenneth Anger editing film (left) and as the Changeling Prince (below) in Max Reinhardt's version of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream *(1935).*

Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills

more and more bookings, more rentals." Various institutions like the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Modern Art have been buying up whole sets of prints, and in 1970 Anger put together what he calls "my one and only feature," a compilation of his best films entitled *The Magick Lantern Cycle*, which he personally presents on the average of twice a year. "I don't solicit screenings; I wait for people to approach me," he says. "I don't do it at every little university up and down the road. It happens about as often as I care for it to happen. I wouldn't like a permanent part of my life to be a kind of traveling medicine show."

For privacy and reticence are very much the keystones of Kenneth Anger's life. His films can be seen as the essence of personal cinema, and his aura is of a tentative man who chooses words and actions with extreme care. Now living in New York, he is a constant traveler, "a gypsy. I really like to be on the road, wherever my next film's going to be." Anger is taking Marianne Faithful and half a dozen others to Egypt, for instance, to film *Lucifer Rising*, and is currently contemplating trips to South America and Africa. He enjoys the fact that he hasn't been written about extensively and is "very grateful for the fact that I can be quite anonymous and move through the world anonymously. I know Mick Jagger, and I know the kind of way that he's a prisoner of his image. In London, he used to live near the embankment of the Thames, and at three in the morning it's quite deserted. And he would just go out and run for three blocks, just so he could feel out in space and not always within walls. Just to feel free." He sees himself, in short, "the opposite of Andy Warhol, who is my idea of a nowhere man. I really dislike everything he stands for: the glamorization of the trivial, the worship of plastic values. It's a real bore."

Yet despite this lack of extensive publicity, his films have succeeded with audiences, and Anger thinks he knows why. "I don't find that my films are hermetic or inaccessible," he says. "I hate to say 'effort' because that sounds like drudgery, but I think mostly it's a matter of openness and goodwill. I think they continue to attract people because they're movies. I think they're real movies."

If his films are real movies, it is hardly an accident, because perhaps Kenneth Anger's greatest love and influence is the old days of big studio Hollywood. When asked about his favorite films he mentions exotica like D. W. Griffith's 1928 *Battle of the Sexes*—"it's a masterpiece from every standpoint"—and he talks with great nostalgia about the way things were, even down to the quality of projection.

"I remember clearly the films I saw when I was a kid," he says. "They were beautifully projected, had beautiful sound, the changeovers were impeccable, and these were just neighborhood movie houses. The reason was that the theaters were owned by the studios, and it would get back to the studio if they were showing their product out of focus. You can call this a cartel, but as far as films being in focus is concerned it was a good thing, because there was pride in the product, right up through the final distribution."

"Hollywood," he says with a wistful sigh. "A part of its charm was its sort of unflinching vulgarity. It always had that brassiness to it. It had the courage of its convictions, crazy as they were. And the studios used to have these incredibly skilled craftsmen, the special effects departments, and the miniaturists; all that sort of hokum movie magic has always interested me very much. It's all a great loss. It means a certain kind of film really can't be made anymore."

Anger's nostalgia for the old Hollywood is based not on a life spent in darkened screening rooms but on personal experience. Born in Santa Monica on February 3, 1932, the son of an electronics engineer at Douglas Aircraft, his parents "thought that I should become an aeronautical engineer or something like my brother and like my father." However, his grandmother, Bertha Coler, a costume mistress in silent films, had other ideas. Says Anger, "She was my champion. She bought me my first Bell and Howell camera, and she, in fact, was the producer of *Fireworks*." When Anger was four and a pupil at Maurice Kossloff's Dancing School for children, she had a pivotal effect. As a friend of the great German expatriate director Max Reinhardt, she suggested he come over and look at the youngster, a look that resulted in Anger getting the

featured role of the Changeling Prince in Reinhardt's opulent *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ("the dreamiest of the dream factor productions," says Anger—who wants to call his autobiography "Airborne With Titania"—"and a primal experience for me").

"I have a crystal-clear memory of it," he says, especially "the day the cellophane moonbeams caught on fire. There were suspended steel steps going around this plaster tree, and the steps were covered with a sort of crinkled cellophane. The fairies, little kids from about four to eight years old, were dressed in crinkled, shredded cellophane, and they had to run up the steps and kind of do these dancing leaps and things. It was a lovely shot, but it was terribly difficult to do. Cellophane was a wonderful material. It took the light beautifully, but it's quite inflammable. And one day they put the arc lights too close, the cellophane caught on fire, and the kids just scattered. I think some of them got their butts singed. They could have burned up, you know. But they took risks in those days, perhaps more than they do now."

Being a cute little tyke, Anger became involved in many Hollywood celebrations. He remembers being conductor of a toy orchestra that featured "Andre Previn on woodblocks"; he became pals with the dwarf who danced on the banquet table in *Freaks* and later sold papers on Hollywood Boulevard; and he even danced with Shirley Temple at something called the Santa Monica Cotillion, where "it was considered democratic to let the movie royalty mix in with ordinary kids to keep them from getting fat heads. She was exquisite, but she wasn't overwhelmingly friendly. In fact, at one point she was quite irritated at me because I think I blew one of the contests which she would have won if she had any other partner but me. I insisted on putting in a sort of little surreal caper in the middle of one of the steps, and the judges frowned on it, I could see."

As for his interest in making films, it also started under the influence of his grandmother, who took him to "the first film I ever remember seeing," at an outdoor Chautauqua meeting in Pacific Palisades. "It was a double bill of Al Jolson in *The Singing Fool* and the Sol Lesser cut of Eisenstein's *Thunder Over Mexico*. I was about four years old, and I remember the Eisenstein images just about put me on the edge of my seat. When they come to the scene with the peons buried in the ground with the executioners galloping over them with their horses, I remember being very disturbed and riveted by it. But I never hid under the seat or anything. I remember watching it." Out of that experience came the attraction of filmmaking, the attraction that persists: "It's sort of the possibility of creating a whole world. It's my idea that film can create an alternative universe and really be beyond time and space."

From that day to this Anger figures he has made some twenty films, a good number of them uncompleted projects like twenty minutes of a version of *The Story of O* and what he calls "apprentice works" made when he was very young. His very first film, "Who Has Been Rocking My Dream Boat," completed at age twelve, had the following genesis: "We had a 16mm windup, 100-foot-load Kodak camera which was used once a year on the annual family vacation. One year we came back from Yosemite with a couple of reels of film left over. I noticed the expiration date, and I said, 'Well, this is gonna spoil before next summer, why don't you let me use it for something.' So that's the sort of sneaky way I started."

The work with which Anger begins what he calls "my public films" is the precocious *Fireworks*, capped by a Roman candle exploding out of a sailor's pants. "It cost about a hundred dollars, and it was made the way I like to make 'em, fast, during the seventy-two hours my parents were away at my uncle's funeral," he says. "The sailors were students at USC, they couldn't have been nicer, more cooperative. They even gave me the film. I think it was ripped off from Uncle Sam."

After old Hollywood, Kenneth Anger's other great interest has been magic, specifically the magic of Englishman Aleister Crowley. It is not a subject Anger discusses easily. He feels it is "easily misconstrued," that the current occult revival is largely "a lot of superficial nonsense bandied about for people to make money on. It has attracted a certain fringe element of nuts and crackpots." He says he believes not in witchcraft but in "another reality. The mass of people are blind to a lot of the inner workings of things. Actually they can be quite obvious, if you just have the viewpoint." And he considers Crowley "a great towering genius who remains understood only by a few people," a man he was attracted to in good part by his sense of humor. "There's a formula he had for the universe which is called the Universal Joke, and it's a way of looking at the universe which I find very appealing, more than seeing it as some inexplicable disaster. He had a terrific sense of humor. He wrote limericks and joke poems," one of which comes in handy for remembering the correct pronunciation of the man's name. "My name is Aleister Crowley," it goes, "I'm master of magic unholy."

Anger's devotion to Crowley took him in 1955 to an island off Cefalù, a Sicilian seaport where the magician had once turned an eighteenth-century farmhouse into his personal abbey, painted walls and ceiling with frescoes, "all these hyper-psychedelic murals of goblins and demons and so forth, a lady being balled by a goat and things like that. Actually, they're very good paintings. They're similar in feeling to Ensor, the Belgian painter of masks." After Crowley was kicked off the island by Mussolini, the frescoes were covered with whitewash and the house was vacant for thirty-seven years until another one of Anger's seemingly endless list of fascinating acquaintances, Dr. Alfred Kinsey, took a hand in things.

Anger, it turns out, had worked for Kinsey, helping him find people to interview for *Sexual Behav-*

ior in the Human Male, and reviewing films. "He had a lot of stag films which had been confiscated in police raids. He knew people in various police departments, and instead of throwing the films into the furnace as they were supposed to do, he would persuade the police to give them to his collection. He didn't have time to personally evaluate a number of them, so he asked me to see them and then to write up a thumbnail review of what I thought."

Kinsey had heard of Crowley's erotic frescoes. "He knew I was interested in Crowley, so he said, 'Why don't you go down there and see what's under the whitewash, they may still be there.' It turned out they were. So I spent three months scraping off the whitewash, which had turned to stone. I had to sponge it off with diluted hydrochloric acid. It was a big job, but it was really one of the most thrilling things I've ever done."

Not everyone was as pleased about this as Anger. The local peasants, for example, "became rather exercised. There were all kinds of rumors and legends about this place, and they decided that I was there to start up Crowley's cult. So they began to kind of be very leery of me, and they killed a cat on my doorstep, which is a peasant's way of trying to put a curse on somebody or to drive them away." And after finishing with the frescoes and photographing them, Anger did leave, but not, he says, in any unseemly haste.

As an illustration of his ideas of "the way magic works," Anger slowly tells the story of raising a spirit in Golden Gate Park. "I call it magic; someone else would just call it coincidence," he says by way of preamble. "But for the magician there is no such thing as coincidence. Everything that happens has to be read into the record. Life for a magician is causal at all times, there are no off days, even though there can be days when nothing much is happening."

On this particular day Anger was in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, doing a dawn reading of one of Crowley's rituals, "the transposition of an Egyptian ritual for a certain spirit who's identified with a very sharp azure blue. The closest thing in nature is those South American butterflies that are used to make decorative trays, sort of an electric blue. And that's one of the color keys to Lucifer.

"After I finished reading this in a very isolated part of the park overlooking an ornamental lake—quite a beautiful spot—I looked up and the first rays of sun, dawn had just broken. And from across the other side of the lake there was a flash of blue light in exactly that color blue. It was just one of those things I learned to take for granted; I mean it surprised me but it didn't knock me out. I accepted it rather than sort of running away screaming or something.

"I walked around to the other side of the lake to see what it was, because it just seemed like somebody flashing a message. I approached a figure that was like a statue kneeling beside the lake with his arms outstretched. Floating around in the lake near him were a group of wild ducks who settled on the lake, and he was just about ready to grab a duck and catch it with his bare hands, which is rather a trick.

"When I came around he looked up at me, and then I saw what I had thought was this flash of light. He was wearing a locket around his neck in the form of a heart, the kind you can buy in some little souvenir store or something, and it actually was made from the wing of one of those butterflies behind a little piece of glass, and this had acted like a searchlight. And it turned out that his name was Joe and that his full name was Joe Lucifer, and that he was an escapee from a mental hospital in Oregon, on the run. He'd been sleeping in Golden Gate Park, and he was catching ducks so he could wring their necks and eat them raw. I guess you have to be pretty hungry before you'll consider such an act. I said, 'Well, come on, I'll invite you out to breakfast.' So I took him to a little cafe that was open not too far away, and I kind of looked after him for about a week until he disappeared.

"He was very much a human being. He had part Irish, part Syrian ancestry, bright green eyes, and all his brothers were sailors in the merchant marine. And he had a strange drawing on the back of his coat which was a male torso and then coming out of the neck were two heads, one a male head and the other a female head. I said, 'What's that?' and he said, 'That's a self-portrait of me.'

"Well, you see, this was a demon manifesting itself in human form."

Anger's interest in magic and ritual leads to one of his oddest film experiences, his first attempt to film *Lucifer Rising*. He had cast in the lead a young man named Bobby Beausoleil, who later became a follower of Charles Manson and is now serving a life sentence in San Quentin for homicide. Needless to say, he was playing the lead, but Anger, finding him "not the most honest person," had to fire him. "He broke in the studio after I'd left and tried to steal all the footage he was in. But he overlooked a number of reels that I stuck underneath the cutting table. From these I managed to cut *Invocation of My Demon Brother*."

In many ways, the world has changed since Kenneth Anger started making films. "What used to be considered shocking," he says, "is now just taken with your morning coffee," and his films, once considered risqué, are now quite accepted. "Our culture has evolved. It's a bit more sophisticated, and I see it all with a slightly ironical detachment. No, I would say that I'm actually pleased that some of the elements in my films can be accepted without such a hassle. I don't think that a film like *Fireworks*' ability to reach somebody depended on the possibility that the police were going to break down the door and arrest everyone and cart off the projector, which was a distinct possibility during some of the early screenings."

One change that has been less than pleasant has been the increasing costs necessary for filmmaking, costs which have discouraged Anger from perhaps trying his first sound film, something he has avoided in the past because "it would give the films

a kind of weight of the wrong kind, tie it down to a time and place too much. Suddenly you'd say, 'Well, he comes from Brooklyn.' "

Now, however, economics has become as big a problem as aesthetics. "It's no longer as easy to make films as it once was," Anger says, "because the stupid fact of inflation makes filmmaking a luxury rather than something that can be undertaken without too much thought. I mean lab costs have tripled in the last five years. Things like that. It makes a lot of difference. I've always been sort of a one-take man; I've always thought about what I wanted to do and shot very little extra. I think *Fireworks* was completely done with one take all the way through, a one-to-one ratio. There was about two-and-a-half feet that was cut out and thrown away. Usually I had only a certain amount of stock to work with. It was a question of getting a film out of what I had. That sort of thing has been kind of a challenge that I've really enjoyed. But at the present moment, I don't know."

Despite these problems, there are certain things Kenneth Anger will not do for money. "I have," he says, "a curious resistance to applying for help to other people. For instance, the Ford Foundation grant I got was practically given to me. I didn't have to do hardly any legwork on it." He also resists what he considers "false solutions," things like teaching jobs. "I have sympathy for people who can do this, and I guess it's better than the salt mines," he says. "But I've noticed a peculiar thing, that people who get these teaching jobs, somehow their filmmaking, their personal filmmaking, seems to dry up. They aren't making films anymore. So for personal reasons I've resisted teaching jobs. I prefer to be completely independent if I can." Which left only one alternative: *Hollywood Babylon*.

"The one concession I have made is bringing out the new edition of the book," Anger explains, "and by concession I mean it was done as a means of earning money. I saw that things weren't working out to the degree that I was allowed to continue to make films the way I want to. The lab was refusing to print, and they told me, pay up your bills or else forget it. So the book represents a gesture toward reality without requiring me to do something which I would really consider unpleasant, like a nine-to-five job. Maybe it'll even come to that, but I hope not, because adapting to it for the first time in my life would be pretty damn difficult."

A compilation of juicy Tinseltown gossip and legend and probably better known to the mass of Americans than any of Anger's films—Susan Sontag called it "a book as legendary as its subject"—*Hollywood Babylon* had its genesis in Anger's stay in Paris in the late 1950s. "I was working at the Cinematheque Français at the time," he says, "and I used to entertain my French friends telling them various anecdotes about Hollywood. After all, I went to Beverly Hills High School, which is sort of the gossip mill of all time." An interested listener suggested a series of magazine articles could be made of Anger's stories, and the articles then turned into a French-language paperback published in 1959 by Jean Jacques Pauvert. It is an edition highlighted by selections from Anger's enormous collection of stills, started when he was a boy and now totaling approximately 5,000 carefully stored and cataloged in three different countries.

The book became an immediate success, but its first publication in America was a nightmare for Anger, because it was in a pirated paperback which "sold two million copies" but netted him no money at all. The new edition, published by Straight Arrow in a semi-coffee table format, has been much more to his liking, even though he wasn't allowed to use a photo of one of America's great male stars in a sexually embarrassing position and couldn't afford a shot of James Dean on the slab in the morgue: "It was a beautiful picture. It was extraordinary, and proved he wasn't disfigured at all. It looked like something out of Greek mythology."

Anger claims "the stories that are printed I personally vouch for, and that means I've checked out my sources. I've done as thorough a job as I know how," including tracking down Fatty Arbuckle's bootlegger to find out exactly what was drunk at that infamous party. Still, he admits, "it's a mythological subject in a way, and in some cases the truth is very hard to pin down."

The two halves of Kenneth Anger, the split between the delicate and the profane that come out in his work, reveal themselves very clearly as he talks with great feeling about the choice of stills for *Hollywood Babylon*. On the one hand, when asked what his favorite is he picks a production still from *Tarzan and His Mate* showing Johnny Weissmuller and Maureen O'Sullivan in the foreground with a camera crew hovering on an overhanging tree branch: "To me it has all the qualities of a Boucher or a Watteau. It has a pastoral quality. The gods looking on, which you would have in a Boucher allegory, are like the technicians and the cameramen watching these two, these little divine creatures."

Yet ask him about the question of bad taste in some less discreet photos and what emerges is a spirited defense of a sensibility that would seem totally different from the kind that dotes over a Watteau, a joining of diversities which characterizes Kenneth Anger. "I think life needs to be viewed unflinchingly," he says. "For instance there's a picture which I suppose if anything in the book is bad taste, then that photograph is bad taste, but to me it's a true *momento more*, a very poignant picture that is a true still life. It's a picture of Jayne Mansfield's dead dog with the liquor bottle and part of her torn-off scalp under the car. I mean to me this is like asking Buñuel about bad taste. One doesn't, and I can just shrug. It's part of my vision of what life on earth is like." ■

Kenneth Turan is a staff writer for *Potomac Magazine* of *The Washington Post* and film critic of *The Progressive*.